

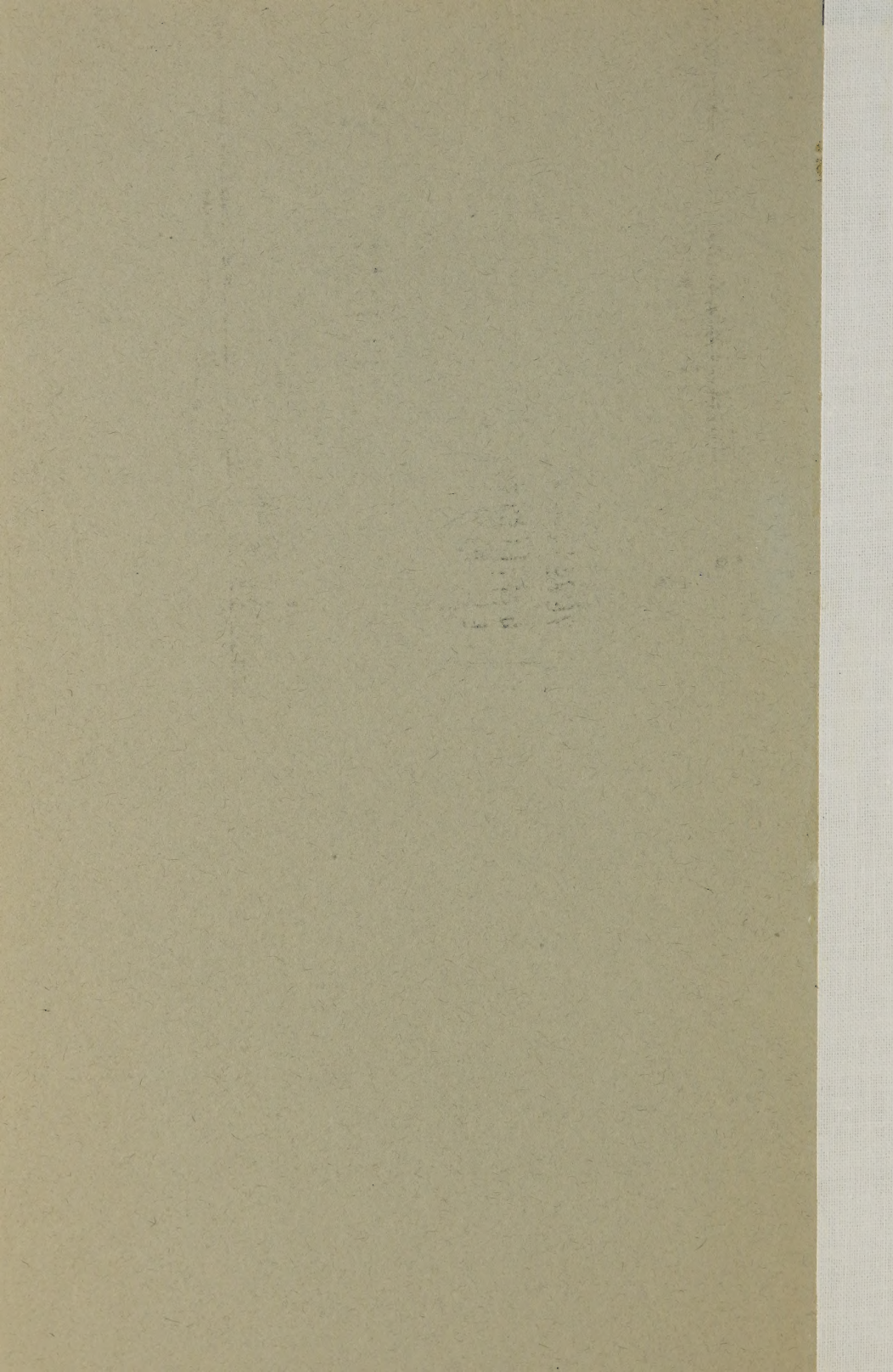
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A New Career After 30

*The report of an
enquiry by the Women's Bureau*

Department of Labour
Canada

A New Career after 30

*Report of an enquiry by the Women's Bureau
into the experience of women who had taken
professional social work training at thirty
years of age or over*

1960

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR OF CANADA

Minister, HONOURABLE MICHAEL STARR

Deputy Minister, A. H. BROWN




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I

Introduction

Why do women past thirty take up a new career? In recent years an increasing, although still comparatively small, number of mature women are found in the class lists of various professional schools, especially those of the more traditional fields of women's work.

There is little doubt that the shortage of qualified personnel for expanding educational, health and social services has been an important factor in this trend. Nor is the lowering of the age of marriage without effect. Younger marriages mean that women in their twenties, many of whom have had little or no professional training or experience, are likely to be absorbed in family responsibilities. By the time they have reached their mid-thirties, however, their children have grown beyond the dependent stage and, looking to the years ahead, they may have an urge to enter professional life.

For women who remain single, preoccupation during their twenties with the finding of a mate may have meant the postponing of decisions about work. Now, having faced such questions more realistically, they may want to strengthen their professional competence or turn to a new field of work, or both. The single women and those who have been widowed or divorced or who are living apart from their husbands, more often than married women living with their husbands, are obliged to earn their living and therefore may have stronger economic reasons for entering upon such training.

Women who in maturity decide to undertake the discipline of professional education are making a commitment that has both personal and social implications. Experience has given them a wider frame of reference for new learning than younger people are apt to have. They welcome the skills and insights of professional training as a source of personal enrichment and as the means to more effective service in the

community. Those who are married are establishing patterns of combining family responsibilities and work that may help to clarify the multiple role of a woman in today's society.

Their undertaking also raises pertinent questions with respect to the education and occupational orientation of girls and women. For instance,

Are we helping girls to get a long view of life, including perspective on their future role in the family, in work and in the community?

Do our educational institutions take sufficiently into account the needs and interests of girls and women at the various stages in their lives and the bearing of these needs and interests on their "readiness for learning"?

Has enough consideration been given to the values of recruiting mature women for professional education?

Are courses of study in professional schools suited to the needs and outlook of mature persons, or are they too exclusively directed to young people?

It may well be asked also whether our communities offer adequate practical services to lighten the load of the mother whose contribution to society will be enriched by professional training and who is conscious of her primary responsibility for her family.

Information about women who undertake such training after the age of thirty—their motives and achievements, their needs and satisfactions—is a pre-requisite for any evaluation of their experience or its consequences for educational and social practice. With this fact in mind the Women's Bureau has carried out this enquiry into the experience of such women who had chosen the field of professional social work.

Names and addresses, without which the enquiry would not have been possible, were made available by the schools of social work. Their assistance and the cooperation of the women who participated are warmly appreciated.

The discriminating editorial comment of Mrs. M. M. King, Editor of *Canadian Welfare*, is gratefully acknowledged and also the advice of Miss Joy Maines, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Social Workers.

It is hoped that this report of the enquiry may be an encouragement to other women who are moved to similar undertakings and also that it may provide useful insights for those concerned with the education and recruitment of women for professional work.

MARION V. ROYCE,
Director, Women's Bureau.

Department of Labour,
Ottawa, Canada.
October 15, 1960.

II

The enquiry

The eight schools of social work¹ across Canada were asked to provide lists of women students who, since 1950-51, had undertaken social work training at thirty years of age or over. The names and addresses of 282 women were supplied, and the Women's Bureau then wrote to each woman enclosing a questionnaire enquiring into her reasons for deciding to study social work at a mature stage of life, and the advantages and disadvantages involved. Each was asked, also, to comment on special satisfactions experienced in work outside the home or in family life that seemed to be attributable to learnings from her social work studies.

In addition to these subjective questions, the women were asked how much education and professional or other work experience they had had, what length of time had elapsed since they had previously done formal study, their civil status both at the beginning and the end of their period of training and, if applicable, the number and ages of their children. There were questions too about how far they went with social work training and the nature of their present employment, including whether it was full or part-time work.

¹ University of British Columbia School of Social Work, Vancouver.
University of Manitoba School of Social Work, Winnipeg.
University of Toronto School of Social Work, Toronto.
St. Patrick's College School of Social Welfare, Ottawa.
McGill University School of Social Work, Montreal.
Université de Montréal Ecole de Service Social, Montréal.
Université Laval Ecole de Service Social, Québec.
Maritime School of Social Work, Halifax.

III

The women who replied

Replies were received from 152 women¹, including two special students from abroad who had returned to their own countries. In the following report the replies to the various questions have been summarized. Several representative profiles that follow through the experience of individual women have been included as an appendix.

Their civil status

Well over half of the respondents (88 out of the 152) were single women; 37 were married and 22 were widowed, divorced or separated; there were also five members of religious orders. During the course of their professional studies the civil status of 16 women had changed: of the single women 10 had married and one had joined a religious order; one married woman had been widowed and three divorced; another who had been separated from her husband became a widow.

Their previous education and work

A Bachelor of Arts degree or its equivalent is the academic requirement for entry into a school of social work, and the majority of the respondents, therefore, had graduated from a university or college of recognized standing. Some had had a good deal more formal education: five had attained the Master of Arts degree and three the doctorate.

Eighteen women—11 single, 4 married and 3 other²—had had some previous training in social work, and 38 (20 single, 9 married, 6 other and 3 religious) had had preparation for teaching. Other types of occupational training ranged widely, with secretarial and nurses'

¹ Because of changes of address unknown to the Schools, 20 questionnaires were returned by the Post Office.

² Widowed, divorced or separated.

training, in that order, in the lead. Thirty-six women had less than a B.A. degree but they had had experience, including appropriate educational background, which had justified their acceptance as special students in a school of social work.³

More varied than their academic attainment was the occupational background of the respondents. Only seven of the entire group had had no experience of working outside the home; of these two were single women, five married and one separated from her husband.

Many of the respondents, particularly the single women, had worked in more than one field. Those who at some time had been teachers exhibited the widest range of employment; only 7 of them, 5 single and 2 married, had worked in the profession continuously and were employed as teachers when they decided to take up social work studies; the others had been stenographers and secretaries, personnel workers or saleswomen at one time or other. The majority, however, had already moved into some type of social work and had come to realize the need for specialized training if they were to continue in the field.

The women who had had business training and whose first employment had been in offices also had often tried a variety of jobs, frequently as staff members in social work agencies; two of them had been medical secretaries and one had worked in a psychiatric clinic.

Twelve of the women had been nurses, and most, though not all of them, had worked exclusively in the nursing field. Of the two married women who had been trained in nursing, neither had been employed immediately before entering a school of social work and one of them, though she had completed her training, had never worked outside her home.

Thirty-six women, at the time they decided to undertake social work studies, were engaged in social work jobs for which they felt their training to be inadequate. For example, one of the single women, after several years of office work following completion of high school, had been employed in social welfare work. Then, having decided that she needed more adequate training, she returned after 20 years away from formal study to take certain pre-requisite university courses in order to gain entry to a school of social work.

³ Up to 10 per cent of its current enrollment, an accredited School of Social Work may admit persons with suitable background, although they have not attained the B.A. degree and, therefore, will be ineligible for a higher university degree. On completion of their social work studies, such persons are awarded either a diploma in social work or a letter certifying that they have satisfactorily completed the requirements of the course.

The majority of the married women, even though they had had some previous professional experience, were not employed outside their homes when they decided to take up social work studies. Several of these, however, over a considerable period of time had been preparing for entry into a school of social work.

One woman, for instance, whose children were 18, 15 and 9 years old when she registered for professional training had been studying for eight years, taking night classes, in order to complete the B.A. degree. She had never worked for pay but had had many years of experience as a social work volunteer. As a part-time student she spent four years at a school of social work, attained the M.S.W. degree and is now employed as a caseworker on the staff of a mental hospital.

The mothers

There were 39 mothers, 25 of them married and 14 widowed, divorced or separated. A higher proportion of the latter than of the former had children under the age of six, but most of the children of the mothers in both categories were of school age, between 6 and 16 years.

There were two mothers with four children each: a married woman with husband present whose children were all of school age and a widow who had two pre-schoolers and two between 6 and 16 years.

Mothers with three children were most frequent; thirteen of these were at present married, and one was a divorcée. The latter had children of 10, 8 and 5 years, respectively, but none of the former had children under 6. Two of these mothers, both European newcomers to Canada, had grown-up children who were on their own.

Of the nine mothers of two children, two were immigrants, one of whom had two pre-school children, while the other had two between 6 and 16. One mother of married status had one school-aged child and one past 16.

Fourteen of those who were married with husband present had only one child. In no case was this one child under 6 years of age, and in four instances he or she was over 16.

So far as one may generalize from so small a sample, it appears that the majority of mothers who are interested in preparing for a career, even those who are widowed, divorced or separated, postpone more advanced professional training until their children are past the earliest stage of childhood.

IV

How far they went in social work training

Well over half of the respondents completed the requirements of the Master of Social Work and had been granted the degree. Just over a fifth had achieved the B.S.W. degree, and 18 women, on completion of their studies, because their previous education did not entitle them to a post-graduate degree, had been granted either a diploma or a certificate; of these, 4 had covered the programme for the M.S.W. and 14 the equivalent of B.S.W. Seven women had been partial students only, and 10 were still involved in study, one working towards a Ph.D. and most of the others completing a thesis.

Degrees Achieved

<i>Degree</i>	<i>Civil Status When Course Was Begun</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Religious</i>	<i>Other</i>	
M.S.W.	55	18	3	10	86
B.S.W.	16	11	1	4	32
Diploma or Certificate	12 ^{1(a)}	2 ^{1(b)}	1 ^{1(c)}	3 ^{1(d)}	18
Partial Students	2	2	—	3	7
Still studying	4 ²	4	—	2	10 ²
Total	89 ²	37	5	22	153 ²

¹ (a) Two at MSW level and 10 at BSW level.

(b) One at MSW level and one at BSW level.

(c) BSW level.

(d) One MSW level and two at BSW level.

² Includes one who has completed MSW and is now in a doctoral programme.

What happened to them after training

Well over one half the respondents, including a high proportion of the married women, at the time they replied to the questionnaire, were employed in social casework. They were working in a variety of situations, the largest number in mental or general hospitals, and almost as many in the fields of family and child welfare on staffs of family service bureaus, children's aid societies or similar agencies. Several were employed in child guidance clinics and other institutions for children in rehabilitation services for the handicapped and retarded and in the public welfare field. One woman was doing relief work in an agency abroad.

There were 44 women in administrative or supervisory positions. On the whole these were employed by agencies similar to those in which the caseworkers were engaged, and the majority were responsible for the supervision of caseworkers or were the administrative heads of casework agencies.

Among those in supervisory and administrative work in *private* agencies were the following:

The casework supervisor in a children's aid society;

The supervisor of a family service centre;

The supervisor of the unmarried parent division of a children's aid society;

The administrative assistant of a child welfare agency, with responsibility for the training of social workers on the staff;

The executive director of a family welfare service in a large city.

Others doing similar work were engaged by *public* welfare agencies, for example,

A supervisor of child welfare for a provincial government;

A departmental assistant in a provincial department of welfare, administering social assistance.

Those in administration extended also to the group work field. For instance, there were a year-round camp director, directors of various agency training programmes, several YWCA executive directors and the head of a settlement house. Five group workers were teaching, three on the staffs of schools of social work, and two were employed by recreational agencies.

One woman was working in the field of public relations in the interpretation of social work, and another with immigrants in the field of community organization.

A widow and 10 married women, seven of whom had been married after launching upon social work training, were not employed outside their homes, and one woman had taken a combined educational-secretarial post as a "needed change from social work".

Post-Training Employment

<i>Present Civil Status</i>	<i>Type of Work</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Administrative or Supervisory</i>	<i>Case- work</i>	<i>Group Work</i>	<i>Teaching</i>	<i>Other</i>	
Single	23	43	—	4	7	77
Married	7	23	1	—	12	43 ¹
Other	9	14	1	—	2	26 ²
Religious	5	—	—	1	—	6 ³
Total	44	80	2	5	21 ⁴	152

¹ Includes ten women who were married during their training.

² Includes three women who were divorced and one who became a widow during the course.

³ Includes one woman who joined a religious order during the course.

⁴ Includes seven women who were still studying and eleven full-time housewives.

Special schedules for those who were employed

All but ten respondents were full-time workers. Nine of those on part-time schedules were married women with children, and one was a single woman dividing her time between a job and special studies. All of the part-time workers were doing casework, in several instances in connection with a hospital but more often in family service agencies.

Schedules appeared to have been worked out on an individual basis, to the mutual convenience of the worker and the agency but usually with particular consideration of the exigencies of the worker's

life. For instance, one woman with three children who received half of the annual salary for a particular position worked more than half-time each week from September to June in order to have a free month in the summer in addition to the regular month's holiday. This arrangement, under which she had worked for three years, made it possible for her to spend two full months with her family while the children were out of school.

Several others were engaged for certain days of the week. Among these was a caseworker who worked eight hours on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays plus one Saturday morning each month. Another was a caseworker on a hospital staff whose working day was 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. four days a week. Still a third, the mother of two pre-school children, worked from two to five o'clock daily from Monday to Friday, leaving her children in the care of a competent woman.

A caseworker with a family welfare agency worked four-fifths of full-time, or 32 hours per week. Her schedule included three full days of eight hours, one evening from six until nine o'clock, and five hours' work on records which she did at home. Still another had a schedule which varied even more from day to day: Monday, 9:00 to 12:00; Tuesday and Friday, 9:00 to 3:30; Thursday evening, 6:00 to 9:30.

VI

Why they had chosen social work

An interest in people and a desire to be able to give them competent assistance in working through their problems had motivated most of the women who replied to the questionnaire. At the same time each respondent expressed other quite personal reasons for deciding to take professional training in social work. These reasons, stemming from previous work experience and personal or family situations, are strongly marked by a need and desire to move out into broader fields of service in the community.

All of the women who had been employed at the time they decided to study social work had either reached a point when it was necessary, or at least desirable, to improve their professional status and competence or were attracted to social work from other occupations which had not been personally satisfying.

Half the single women and a few in each of the other categories had been untrained or partially trained social workers to whom it had become apparent that further training was necessary to obtain greater satisfaction and advancement in the profession. Their ambition was expressed in highly individual ways.

"I had had four years of practical experience in the field and wished to fortify this with formal training," wrote one woman.

Another remarked with a certain grimness, "I realized I could never do the type of work I wanted to do unless I had those mystic symbols, M.S.W., after my name."

A third person wanted "a period of intensive, skilled supervision and time to study and think without the constant responsibility of making the decisions required in an administrative job." Facing the financial risk involved in giving up a paid job for two years of study, she concluded, "the scarcity of well trained and experienced personnel seemed to promise secure future employment for the well equipped social worker."

Many of the respondents shared the opinion that, because of the shortage of trained social workers, employment would be more likely to be assured in this field than in many other occupations. Several who were hesitant about the venture they were launching upon took courage from the hope that social work might be an occupation in which an older person would be welcome and where value would be attached to experience of life.

Typical of the teachers who were turning to a new career in social work was one who wrote:

As a teacher I had become interested in the problems of individual children—emotional disturbances, economic and social problems—and their relationship to educational retardation and delinquency. I also became interested in the quality of family relationships and how children in school are affected by the family situation from which they come.

To cope with such individual problems she had come to the conclusion that she needed social work training. This woman is now head of a child guidance clinic operated by a large city school system.

Several of those who had been nurses continued in the public health field after completing social work training. One of these commented:

After working for three years in an agency where I was doing a great deal of social work as well as nursing, I found that I was very much interested in this type of work but felt the inadequacy of my background.

Those who had left secretarial work had made their decision for the most part because they thought that social work would give more scope for initiative or a longed-for chance to work with people. One woman described her dilemma thus:

I found secretarial work unsatisfying, but could not make up my mind to go back to the university to train for a more rewarding vocation until I realized that I might never marry. Then I felt that steps had to be taken to ensure that I would be happily occupied and interested in my work. This was the deciding factor. Social work seemed and has proven to be a wonderfully satisfactory answer.

Twenty-two women had had war service that had influenced their occupational outlook. Of these, 12 had been members of the Armed Forces, while several had done welfare work with such agencies as the Canadian Red Cross Society, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Young Men's Christian Association, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and the International Refugee Organization. The others had worked in war plants, in censorship, and in government departments directly connected with the war.

One woman who had been in the Armed Forces for four years writes, "As a Company Sergeant-Major in the Army, I became interested in people, their problems and behaviour patterns."

Another who had done welfare work in England says:

War-time work with people with problems revived an early interest in social work which had been awakened by voluntary and also paid jobs that I had done in a settlement house during my university days. I decided that professional training was essential if I were to become a competent social worker.

Still another, who had done censorship work in Canada and Germany during the war and afterwards filled secretarial and research jobs, says of her reasons for becoming a social worker:

I felt it was a field in which a woman could find real satisfaction from working with people. Although my previous work experience had been interesting, it involved office routine and paper-work which, to me, is not as rewarding as a direct relationship with people which makes it possible to be helpful to them.

The replies, especially those of the married women, reflect a sense of responsibility to make constructive use of earlier education or to pursue interests awakened at various stages of life. For example, one woman writes:

At the university I had majored in sociology and psychology and had always been interested in pursuing the use of the education I had gained. I was working as an untrained social worker and realized that to make my best contribution I needed training. I felt I was merely scratching the surface and didn't know why I was functioning as I did.

A considerable number of respondents, irrespective of marital status, felt an urge to attain a deeper understanding of human behaviour. Not a few of the married women regarded this desire as an outcome of their own family experience. "Having my own family had heightened my interest in personal interaction", wrote one woman.

Another commented:

I was particularly interested in marriage counselling. I have seen many marriages fail quite unnecessarily. Out of my own experience, with appropriate training, I felt I could do something to help people who were facing a marital crisis.

Three unmarried women indicated that in deciding to go into social work they had been influenced by religious leaders. One of these wrote:

My interest in this field stemmed primarily from my church life. I was always interested in a service profession and the special impetus towards social work training came from my rector.

The members of religious orders were similarly motivated by religious experience and by the direction of their superiors.

Many, especially among the married women or those who had been married but were now alone, had done voluntary work in the community that had awakened their interest in entering the field professionally. One of them wrote:

At first, social service was a distraction for me. Later it became an economic necessity for me to work, and as a result of years of voluntary work in mothers' assistance I had no difficulty in choosing the occupation I wanted to pursue.

Three immigrants who had been social workers in their former countries needed Canadian training in order to practise according to standards in this country. The two foreign students were social workers who had been granted fellowships to complete their professional training in Canada.

Summary

Reasons for entering upon social work training varied with the personal and family situation of each respondent. In most cases they combined a genuine interest in people with a need for broader fields of service, most often expressed in a desire to understand and be of help to other human beings. A considerable number already had had experience in the field either as untrained social workers or in a voluntary capacity. Those who had turned to social work from other occupations such as office work and teaching wanted to work with people in a more vital and individual relationship.

VII

The advantages and disadvantages that they found

Most of the women who replied to the questionnaire found it difficult to weigh against one another the advantages and disadvantages of taking social work training at a mature stage of life. While in most cases the balance appears to have been a favourable one, none had been entirely free of handicap. A typical comment illustrates this perhaps inevitable ambivalence:

The main advantage was stronger motivation and rich background of experience which made learning intensely interesting. The main disadvantages were going from a position carrying authority and status to one of dependency on teachers again and the fact that ideas and opinions were pretty firmly set, so that new ones were harder to integrate than when I had studied previously.

Considerable numbers felt that they were more clearly motivated than they would have been at an earlier stage in their lives. A single woman, for instance, remarked, "I had had enough time to look around and knew that this was without doubt the kind of work I'd like to do."

One of the married women spoke with equal clarity:

My goals and purposes were not as complex as those of the younger women students who were concerned as well with getting married. Also I did not have the same urgency to 'get through' and begin earning. I therefore had more time for and interest in study and reading.

Many of the replies reflect the exhilaration of intellectual growth and an unselfconscious at-homeness with people that is a mark of maturity. "I felt a deep personal satisfaction as I found myself changing and developing", wrote one woman. "I realized anew that growth has no age limit. I felt an enjoyment of fellow classmates and faculty." She attributed this satisfaction to a sense of readiness for the kind of experience the course afforded her:

I had tried to work with people without the professional insights and skills of social work and was therefore the more aware of my need for such background.

For her the balance was clear:

The initial problem of disciplining myself, curtailing social life, concentrating on study, living on a very limited income was more than offset by a clear sense of goal and by the satisfactions of new learning.

One woman had had unmixed satisfaction. She says:

The advantages so far outweighed the disadvantages that I can't even recall feeling any of the latter. The two years which I spent at the School of Social Work were among the most satisfying of my life.

Unlike some of the women who replied to the questionnaire, she had not had to face the difficulty of associating with only young students. Nor had she had the difficulty some others had experienced in getting back to studies again. She continues:

I was fortunate, I think, in returning to school at a time when there were many ex-Service personnel in the student body, so that I had the advantage of not being in a minority age group. My money was limited, but so it was for most members of my class, and this fact provided a bond rather than otherwise. Studying was easier for me than it had ever been before and my achievement was higher.

The difficulty experienced most frequently was in settling down to study after being away from it for long periods, and for a considerable number it was not easy to return to the student role. This is illustrated in one person's catalogue of problems:

Dislike of return to the student role, loss of income and return to dependence on others, loss of spare time, especially evenings and weekends which had to be devoted to study; difficulties in competing academically with younger students who had just completed the B.A. and come straight to the School of Social Work with little or no work experience of any kind; difficulties in relationships with younger students, especially related to different interests and attitudes in things outside of social work.

Some of the respondents had found the courses too elementary, "tailored more to young, inexperienced undergraduate students than to people of an age to be taking post-graduate studies." One woman who felt this way commented:

The main disadvantage is that the training is not geared to the more mature person, and in many respects sets the person back, rather than forward. The older student must make many adjustments, and one would wish for a more adaptable programme. Advantages of later training are realized more following graduation, when training, coupled with maturity, proves an invaluable asset in a profession which deals with human beings.

For various reasons there was often some unlearning to do. One woman who had worked for seven years in the child welfare field with only a B.A. degree says:

Since my work experience had been in the field of social work, I found much of the basic study extremely simple. However, I did also find that I had settled into certain patterns of work which had to be changed in my professional training. I had much re-learning to do, especially in techniques.

Sometimes the re-learning presented psychological obstacles. "I had a certain reluctance to accept the teaching of instructors my own age as more valid than my own ideas," wrote one woman, and with disarming frankness, she added, "At first I was also more sensitive to criticism of my work than I would have been at an earlier age." Still another, not without a touch of irony, made the point that age is not so important a factor in a capacity for social work training as is "a certain amount of flexibility and curiosity."

The disadvantage most often remarked upon by the single women was an economic one. In addition to loss of income while taking the course, they had had to face both the cost of the training and also the effect on pension entitlement of leaving an established position either temporarily or permanently. Moreover, the older student frequently has more financial responsibilities and commitments than has the younger one. A further negative economic factor of which the single women were especially aware was that the older person has a shorter span of active professional life left in which to make use of social work training and also to build up pension rights in preparation for retirement.

The number of widowed, separated and divorced women who mentioned financial difficulty associated with the age at which they took their training was approximately ten per cent less than that of single women who mentioned it. None of the married women respondents mentioned the economic factor as a disadvantage. On the other hand, several commented on the advantage of the assured financial position provided by their husbands. Because of their special status, there were, of course, no financial difficulties involved for the religious sisters.

Children made a difference

Without exception the mothers whose children were of school age or younger had found difficulty in keeping a schedule of lectures, study and field work in addition to home and family obligations.

"At all times", wrote a mother of three children of school age, the youngest seven years old, "I had to plan carefully in order to attend lectures and make time for study."

Another woman, however, had found that the home study she was obliged to do during her professional training had had a stabilizing influence on the study habits of her children who were 15, 13 and 11, respectively, when she registered in a school of social work. Though the way was not without difficulty, she felt that in the long run the results had been constructive. "At times the children resented my study-time," she wrote, "but I felt that consistent, regular concentration on my social work assignments helped to make them more self-reliant."

Similar conviction is frequently expressed; one woman put it this way, "My family learned to cooperate in a mutual effort and not just leave it to mom."

A European newcomer whose two children were under three wrote of the difficulties arising from her "special life situation". "I started my family at the same time as I was undertaking my studies. I was too old to delay with one or the other." She had been away from formal study for ten years, but her former studies had been in the field of psychology, and she was attracted to social work. A general feeling of financial insecurity in a new country had given her a special sense of urgency not to delay professional training.

Several women commented on the lacks in community services that would have supported their effort. For instance, the lack of a nutritious supervised lunch for school children had made it necessary for one mother to go home every day at noon to prepare a hot meal for her youngest child, a seven-year-old. This additional travelling back and forth half an hour each way in the middle of the day, she felt might have been avoided had such a service been available in the school.

For those whose children were already grown one of the most frequently expressed reasons for deciding to study social work was to fill free time. At the same time many of the mothers of school-aged children felt that they were preparing for the future when family cares would be lessened. Already many of them had found that the care of their children was less demanding of their time.

One woman whose only child was fourteen when she began her social work studies wrote, "I found that I had time on my hands as my daughter's interests took her farther from home."

Another whose three children ranged in age from 11 to 17 years when she began her social work studies vividly described her experience:

The children were needing less and less of my time, and I could see ahead to when, if I did not have an outlet for myself, I would be lonely and bored in an almost empty home. I had a desire to work with other children or with parents or people who had the kind of problems that I knew inevitably arose out of the complexities of family living. It began as a hobby and ended in a career.

One mother of four school-aged children stressed not only the future possibilities of being able to do "useful work in the community when the children are older", but wrote also of the intellectual interest and stimulation in which she had found "personal challenge at this period when the children are all at school and I have more time for myself."

Another put the matter quite simply: "When my children are grown and have left home I want to be prepared to be useful to others." This woman had found that her studies "tied in closely with the experience of 20 years of marriage, raising a family and being attuned to social problems." However, it had been difficult for her "to manage time selectively and carefully in order to attend classes regularly and do the required reading." Moreover, she had been unable to do as thorough study as she would have liked to do.

The need to provide for their children as well as for themselves gave added impetus to mothers who were alone. For these women professional training was the key not only to a field of work which interested them but to an assured livelihood for themselves and their children.

Looking back on their recently completed social work training, the married women with children who had not taken up paid employment made interesting observations about its value. None had found the experience a liability. Most felt their greatest gain had been a clearer insight into human behaviour and how to deal with it. "One is equipped with better understanding of oneself, one's family, and the community", wrote one woman, and another:

My study has helped me to keep a balance in my family life in that it has given me better understanding of my husband and children and has made it possible for me to be more intelligently helpful in the community.

A woman whose husband's work necessitates moving to a new place every few years had found that her study of community organization helped her more quickly to be comfortable in a new setting.

On the whole, too, their replies like those of the women alone with the care of their children, reflect the sense of security that comes from having recognized professional status. They had come to grips with the possibility of needing at some time to earn a living for themselves and their children.

Summary

An element of ambivalence occurs in the respondents' thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking social work training at a mature stage of life. For most of them, chiefly because of the clarity of their goals and a mature capacity to integrate new learning with past experience, the advantages seemed to have outweighed the disadvantages. The latter, however, were none the less real.

Chief among them was the difficulty of accepting the student role and settling down to concentrated study. Some found the content of the course too elementary, others had difficulty in overcoming a certain rigidity of mind and had had to do a good deal of unlearning.

For the single women in particular and also for some of those who were widowed, divorced or separated their years of study presented economic handicaps, such as loss of salary and pension entitlement and the problem of financing their studies. Several married women, on the other hand, mentioned the advantage of financial security in setting out upon the course because their husbands were able and willing to subsidize their studies.

Most of the mothers who answered the questionnaire had measured the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking professional training at a mature stage of life in terms of the present needs of their children and the future when, their family responsibilities lessened, they would have time on their hands. Practically all of them had had difficulty in resolving the inevitable counter claims of home and family with the exigencies of the course. In some cases the mother's regular commitment to study had seemed to have a stabilizing influence on the children. Almost without exception they had found their training the means to greater satisfaction in meeting the demands of their daily life and work and therefore considered that it had been a thoroughly worthwhile experience.

VIII

Conclusions

The outstanding characteristic of the women who replied to the Women's Bureau questionnaire about professional social work taken after the age of thirty was that they knew what they wanted to do and why. Their motives were rooted in their own experience and aspirations. All were interested in people and wanted to be able to understand and help them, especially people for whom the load of living had become too heavy.

Within this framework each woman began from her own conscious need: the untrained social workers were impelled by their lack of professional knowledge and skill; those who had chosen social work as a new profession were seeking work that involved more personal relationships with other people; women whose children were requiring less of a mother's time wanted to make a life for themselves.

The obstacles they met also varied with personal circumstances but usually included the normal apprehensions of a human being in a new and demanding situation. There was the reluctance of the mature to be placed in competition with the young, the fear of some loss of intellectual capacity because of age, the discovery in oneself of an unsuspected rigidity of outlook.

The married women, especially the mothers, found it difficult to cope with a full schedule of study along with the demands of home and family. Temporary loss of income or pension entitlement was a hardship for the ones who had to earn their own living and, in some cases, support their children as well.

On the whole the advantages of which they had been aware were the result of their "readiness for learning", the wanting or needing to understand and to know, which they felt social work training would help to satisfy. The clarity of their purpose freed them from unnecessary distractions. Because of their experience of life, they found, too, that they were able to assimilate new knowledge more readily than when they were younger.

Those who lacked the required academic background for entry into a school of social work did not qualify for a full degree in social work, a fact that underlines how important it is for a young woman, whatever her personal plans, to finish the discipline of undergraduate studies to which she committed herself when she registered in a university. To give up before completing the work for the B.A. degree is to be hampered in proceeding to professional training, at whatever stage in life she may wish to do so.

Few married women with family responsibilities are able to give undivided time to work outside the home. If such women are to be enabled to make their contribution to the working world, adjustments are required of both the employing agency and the woman herself. The arrangement of part-time schedules for some of those who answered the questionnaire indicates that in the social work profession experiments are underway to cope with this problem, which is so much more often discussed than solved.

Too many women who re-enter the labour force or change their occupation sooner or later after the age of thirty disregard the importance of adequate preparation for a new career. At the same time it may be fairly asked whether society values the potential contribution of such women highly enough to take the necessary steps to encourage and assist them to attain fuller stature. To do so would require reorientation of vocational counselling and preparation for girls and women and acceptance of the fact that the employment of women with family responsibilities requires adaptations such as part-time work schedules and supervised school luncheons for children.

This small survey demonstrates the capability and promise of a group of women past thirty who were challenged to prepare for more productive work in the profession of their choice. To disregard the potential of such women, and of others in their age range who may not have had the advantage of a university education, is to limit individual growth and at the same time lose to the nation a considerable resource of intelligent and dedicated womanpower.

Appendix—Introducing some of the respondents

A former teacher

A teacher who had taken the social work course and achieved her B.S.W. wrote:

While teaching, my interest was directed to those children unreachable by the regular school system—those affected by adverse home conditions, the disturbed, the maladjusted, the delinquent.

She had obtained her B.A. degree just before starting the social work course, but before that had not done formal study, except extramurally, for nine years. She held a first class teacher's certificate.

This woman comments on her experience in undertaking training at a mature age as follows:

The main disadvantage is that the training is not geared to a more mature person, and in many respects sets the person back rather than forward. The older student must make many adjustments, but one would wish for a more adaptable program. Advantages of later training are realized more following graduation when maturity proves to be an invaluable asset in a profession which deals with human beings.

She is at present on leave for further study. Since attaining the B.S.W. she has worked as a caseworker in an institution for emotionally disturbed children, then as caseworker with parents of children presenting behaviour problems.

She has found that:

Basic understanding of human behaviour, methods and techniques learned during training become incorporated in all further practical dealings with people.

A nurse

A nurse, who had been studying almost continuously for the eleven years since completing her training in 1940, obtained her B.S.W. in 1952. Of her reasons for taking the social work course, she says:

I wanted to improve my interviewing skill so that I would be more efficient in mental health aspects of public health nursing.

This woman, besides being a graduate nurse, had a certificate from a university in teaching and supervision in Schools of Nursing and also a certificate in public health nursing. She had obtained her B.A. degree in 1951.

She had done general duty nursing for two years, had been a part-time resident nurse at a large university for the succeeding two years, then had become a lecturer in nursing at the same university, remaining in that position for three years. At that time she became Assistant Supervisor of Public Health Nursing and occupied that position until she began the course in social work.

The only disadvantage she had found in undertaking social work training at this point in her life was the financial loss. Her further comment was:

The advantages of a year of study at this time were very great, as one brings experience to the study and knows what one can apply to one's work. I think I gained educationally and emotionally from the year of study.

She is at present in full-time employment with the health department of a large city, supervising public health nurses in a health unit. She feels that she has gained a great deal from her study of social work and comments:

The interview skills learned in intensive casework study and field work have helped me with my work in homes, in child health centres and in the schools. Also I am sure that I now do a better job of supervising public health nurses.

Being a social worker as well as a nurse has been useful to her in working relationships with health and welfare agencies in the community. In explanation of this competence, she adds:

An understanding of both professions has helped me to recognize and use effectively the resources of the community.

Once an office worker

Seven years as an office clerk and stenographer in a council of social agencies in a large city awakened this woman's interest in taking social work training. She obtained her B.S.W. and spent ten years as a social worker. Then she went back for further training, because she felt she needed it to handle the work she was already doing and possibly more advanced work in the future.

She says of her second year of training:

The main advantage was stronger motivation and a rich background of experience which made learning intensely interesting.

The main disadvantages were going from a position carrying authority and status to one of dependency on teachers again, and the fact that my ideas and opinions were pretty firmly set, so that new ones were harder to integrate than when I had studied previously.

She is now engaged full-time on programme supervision in financial assistance services of a provincial government. Her duties include the analysis and forecasting of expenditures and interpretation of public welfare legislation.

Of the value of her social work studies she wrote:

Training has helped me to see my own particular job within a broad field; it has deepened my understanding of people and sharpened my skill in dealing with human problems, so that I feel much surer than ever before in coping with the problems that I am dealing with.

Social research helped me to think in a more disciplined and scientific way about social problems and gave me methods of collecting and analysing data on which programmes are based.

She had seen the results of war

One woman who attained her M.S.W. degree had been away from formal study for twenty-five years. She had English secondary school and business college education before taking the social work course.

For fifteen years she had had a post as a private secretary. Following that, she had done welfare work in the European theatre of war for five years, then had been employed for a further five years as an untrained social worker.

She decided to study social work because she felt that the social upheaval in Europe consequent upon World War II pointed up the need for social workers in modern society. She also believed that her experience as an untrained worker in which she had found enjoyment indicated that she had a capacity for social work.

She found little disadvantage in undertaking training at a mature stage in life, except that the surrender of income and worker status for that of a student dependent on a training grant was not easy to accept. This feeling had faded quickly, however, under the stimulus of new learning.

Of the advantages, she says:

Life experiences contributed much to the learning process. Maturity had brought with it self-knowledge and self-discipline; study habits, and acceptance of personal responsibility did not have to be learned at the same time as processes and techniques, as is so frequently the case with the young student of social work.

This woman is now working full-time as senior caseworker in a large mental hospital. Her duties involve work with patients and relatives in the rehabilitation of the mentally ill. She states:

Previously, whilst practising as a social worker without formal training, I was frequently frustrated because I did not understand human behaviour sufficiently. Therefore, I made unrealistic demands on other people and on myself and was deeply disappointed when neither they nor I could achieve the goals I set up. Now I can help people more intelligently and within the limitations that we all have.

I also have a body of well-established and documented knowledge at my disposal of which I was ignorant before taking social work training.

Further, I am now able to assist in the training and supervision of social worker internes and beginning social workers. This gives me much satisfaction and helps make more social workers available.

Religious experience and profession had prepared her for social work

A religious sister obtained her M.S.W. after an interval of only 10 months since she had previously done formal study.

She had junior matriculation, a diploma in nursing, and the degree of B.Sc.N., the last obtained just before she began her social work training. Earlier she had obtained a certificate in obstetrical nursing and for several years had been the supervisor of obstetrics and gynaecology in a large city hospital.

Her reasons for deciding to study social work were twofold: first, the desire for a deeper understanding of people with their emotional and social problems, in order to be of greater help to them; secondly, the recognition by her religious superiors of the need for trained social workers in their hospitals and other institutions.

She further says:

I found it a decided advantage to have undertaken training at a mature stage in my life. I believe that my professional experience as a nurse helped me to work with far greater ease with the people with whom I came in contact during my practice in social work.

My religious experiences and profession had already prepared the way for a deeper insight and self-awareness which are so very important in the life of the social worker.

When she answered the Women's Bureau questionnaire, she had just been assigned to set up social work departments in two institutions for children. Her work was to be administrative in nature.

A mother finds a second career

I like to be busy. The children were needing less and less of my time, and I could see ahead to a time when, if I did not have an outlet for myself, I would be lonely and bored in an almost empty home.

This mother began her social work training when her children were 17, 15 and 11 years of age. Twenty years earlier she had completed the degree of Bachelor of Commerce and had done no formal study since that time. Her work experience outside the home had consisted of one year as a full-time writer for an insurance magazine.

She had a desire to work with people, parents and children who had the kind of problems that inevitably arise in the complexities of family life. She therefore turned to social work and completed her M.S.W. degree.

Among the advantages this woman enjoyed in taking training at this stage in her life was financial security; her husband was "quite able to pay the fees". She was conscious also of a certain ease in coping with extra responsibilities, the result of years of experience in managing a household. Her background of living in a family and raising children made the content of the course more meaningful. Moreover, she had "a real hunger for more education, which reduced normal resistance to learning".

She had some difficulty in accepting the status of a student after being an adult with family responsibilities. Studies had to take second place to family needs, and her physical vigour seemed less than in her earlier student days. Writing examinations after a lapse of twenty years was especially difficult.

Nevertheless, her training experience was "a second chance to relish the satisfactions of learning". She came into contact with people who had been doing professional social work as long as she "had been in the kitchen and the laundry". This she found stimulating, while coming to know the younger students was also invigorating. It was reassuring to discover that she was still able to absorb new knowledge and that her powers of concentration were adequate.

Summing up her experience, this woman writes:

Social work training stretches your mind in every direction; family life as well as work experience yields satisfaction, the quality of which is changed because one's understanding of family and clients has changed in texture also.

She is now employed as a caseworker in a forensic clinic in a large city. She works with adults who have been sent by the courts and often also with their relatives.

A newcomer to Canada

A post war immigrant to Canada, a woman married but without children, had returned to formal study after a lapse of twenty-one years and, after completing the requirements for a Bachelor's degree in a Canadian university, obtained the degree, Master of Social Work.

She had had a varied educational and employment background. She had received all her earlier education in Europe—a degree from a faculty of law, a diploma in science and commerce in the field of international trade and a diploma for the teaching of foreign languages. Her experience in paid employment included probation work in connection with the courts and the teaching of languages and literature both to individuals and to groups. She had also done some casework with emigrants.

She had always been interested in the social sciences; this interest had coloured her law studies which included advanced work in the field of juvenile delinquency. She both wanted and needed to find paid employment and, since she could not use her law degree in Canada, it seemed natural to choose social work. The breadth of the field and the mobility it made possible were additional attractions.

This woman felt that her previous experience, professional and otherwise, contributed to a more meaningful integration of the new learning acquired during her social work training. She discovered that she could absorb the new material and comply with academic requirements with no less ease than when she was younger.

The only disadvantage was the unavoidable neglect of her husband during the period of her training, this especially in view of the fact that she had to work part-time during the first year. She states, however, that her husband had always been most cooperative.

She is now employed full-time as a social caseworker on the staff of an institute of psychiatry. She feels that taking the professional social work course has made for greater competency and thus security in her work.

She made the most of her opportunity

A widow returned to take first her B.S.W. and then M.S.W. after a period of twenty-seven years since doing formal study. She says:

I had always wished to take social work training, but finances would not permit this on completion of the requirements for a B.A. degree. When, on the death of my husband, it became necessary for me to work, fortuitously the opportunity of working as a stenographer and later a social worker (untrained) was made available to me. From the beginning of this latter experience I realized I needed further training.

This woman had two children who were six and four years old at the time she began her social work training.

She had become aware of a lack of flexibility in herself as far as learning was concerned. However, she felt she knew what training she wanted and why she wanted it and, like many others who return to work in later years, had responsibilities which necessitated her making the most of the opportunity.

Now, as a caseworker in a clinic of psychological medicine, she feels that, because of her training, she is able to express more effectively her need and desire to be of help to other people.

ROGER DUHAMEL, F.R.S.C.
QUEEN'S PRINTER AND CONTROLLER OF STATIONERY
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